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FREDERIC PORTER VINTON

January 29, 1846 — *May* 20, 1911

Boston Mus
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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS BOSTON

MEMORIAL EXHIBITION
OF THE WORKS
OF
FREDERIC PORTER VINTON

NOVEMBER
1911

THE MERRYMOUNT PRESS BOSTON

26. 5. 1913
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FREDERIC PORTER VINTON

AN exhibition which is a memorial of an artist who was the Dean of Boston painters for so many years as was Frederic Porter Vinton calls attention to the fact that by his death is broken almost the last direct link which unites the artistic present of the city with that awakening of fifty years ago which, although a small, was yet a genuine Renaissance. A comprehensive study of his career would involve a history of the phases of aesthetic change through which Boston has passed during that period, and would obviously be very greatly beyond the compass of the pages of a catalogue. All that is here possible is a brief sketch of his artistic life. Such a sketch must be inadequate to do anything like full justice to his rich and varied personality as shown in many directions, but it should help to an appreciation of his high place in the ranks of contemporary American painters, and of the importance of his work.

Frederic Porter Vinton was born in Bangor, Maine, on January 29, 1846. He came of New England stock, although he believed that the Vintons were originally of Huguenot descent. His parents removed to Chicago when he was ten, and his formal education was gained largely in the public schools of that city; although in a wider sense his mind was formed and developed by intelligent and con-

tinued reading, by contact with cultivated minds, and by travel. After five years in Chicago, the family returned to the East, and the boy of fifteen obtained a place as clerk in the house of Gardner Brewer & Co. In the following year, 1862, he changed to the employ of Hovey & Co., and here remained for three years. It was during this period that he determined definitely to be a painter, his decision being greatly influenced by the sympathy and advice of William M. Hunt.

From early youth the lad had given evidences of his talent. While in the West he had worked somewhat in pastel, and had painted a few ornamental signs. His spare hours were devoted largely to drawing, and an inborn instinct attracted him toward whatever pictures of merit came in his way. The time was in many respects fortunate for a young artist, since Boston in the sixties was being aesthetically enlightened by a group of vital and virile spirits, who, with Hunt at their head, had brought to this country an enthusiasm kindled in the Paris of Corot, Couture, Millet, Courbet, and the other masters of the Barbizon School. Albion Bicknell, John La Farge, Elihu Vedder, Foxcroft Cole, Winslow Homer, Thomas Robinson, and other men of less note gathered around Hunt; while Thomas G. Appleton, Martin Brimmer, Quincy Shaw, Francis Bartlett, Peter C. Brooks, Henry Sayles, and others of their standing supported them cordially. Long before

any other city in the country had quickened to the influence of the new departure in art, Boston had not only responded to it, but had become the one market for canvases which then no other American city would buy, yet which are now recognized as masterpieces. Nowhere else in the land could a young man have found an atmosphere so wholesomely stimulating.

Mr. Vinton's acquaintance with Hunt came about through an incident seemingly sufficiently trivial. As a clerk at Hovey's he was sent across to the old Mercantile Library Building to secure a rope from which a campaign flag was to hang over the street. Arrived on the roof, he found himself looking down into the studio in which Hunt was at work upon "The Listener." Thoroughly absorbed, he hung over the skylight, forgetful of his duty in the store across the way, and then and there he came to the resolution, mighty for the modest and unknown youth, to carry to the famous artist some of his sketches. Hunt perceived the talent in the crude work, and cheered the young man by saying: "You 've as much art as I had when I started; go ahead." By his advice Mr. Vinton began to work more systematically. He entered the drawing classes of the Lowell Institute, and afterward took three courses of art anatomy under Dr. Rimmer. He obtained permission to draw from the casts in the old Athenaeum gallery, and in an unpublished paper of reminiscences he writes:

"The room was often closed in winter, and rarely heated. I have sat there in overcoat and gloves, drawing away for dear life until I could no longer see,—nor feel, I was so benumbed by the cold. As I ramble through the Museum galleries now, I find my old friends in their new home, and rejoice with them in their prosperity. I wonder sometimes if their stony hearts did not pity the friendless, lonely boy who came day after day to that great cold room overlooking the old burying-ground to dream, to wonder, and to work."

Mr. Vinton was now bent upon going abroad to study, and with this end in mind practised the closest and most patient economy. He exchanged commerce for banking in order to have some hours of daylight free for drawing, and was for five years each in the National Bank of Redemption and the Massachusetts National Bank. During this time he was associated more and more closely with artists, and eagerly absorbed whatever aesthetic nourishment came in his way. He began also to contribute art criticisms to the Boston papers, and the excitement and discussion which in 1875 followed his outspoken notice of a Studio Building exhibition led to his appointment as regular art critic for the "Boston Advertiser"

In the autumn of this year he felt justified in cutting loose from the desk of a clerk and devoting himself to art-study. He went to Paris, and by his friend Edwin H. Blash-

field was presented to Bonnat, in whose popular *atelier* he was at once enrolled as a pupil. In the following June, however, Frank Duveneck, who had come to Paris to attend the opening of the Salon, induced him to continue his studies in Munich. Bonnat, although he did not approve of the change, gave the young man a letter, which was never used, to Piloty. Mr. Vinton was received into Piloty's studio, but he did not take kindly to German methods, and after a year of work in Munich he returned to Paris, in, as he says, "a happy frame of mind."

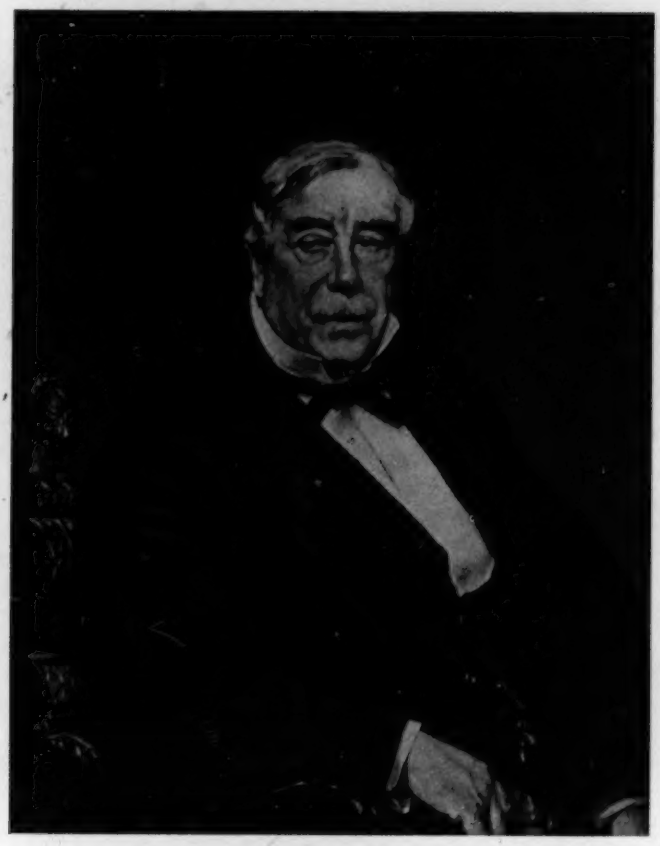
In the Salon of this year, 1877, Jean Paul Laurens exhibited his "Death of Marceau," and received for it the *medaille d'honneur*. The picture so impressed Mr. Vinton that he at once went to call upon Laurens, and asked that he might be received into his newly opened *atelier*. In this studio he was the only American, and although he has recorded that Americans were not wanted there, his relations with the master and with the clever young French painters by whom he was surrounded were most cordial. Here he painted his first Salon picture, "*Une Bohémienne*," which was afterward presented by Mr. Thomas G. Appleton to the city of Lowell.

In the autumn of 1878 Mr. Vinton returned to Boston, and established himself in a studio in Winter Street, at the top of a six-story building. Mr. Appleton had sent to the artist in Paris a sum of money as a commission, and

to fulfill this contract the painter offered him "*Une Bohémienne.*" Mr. Vinton says:

"He came pounding his way with his cane up my five long flights of stairs to see the picture. He at once exclaimed: 'You don't mean that for me, do you?' I answered yes, if he would accept it. 'My little order did n't amount to anything, but this does.' He brought a bevy of pretty women with him on the day following to see my work; and on the day following that he came and proposed that I paint his portrait, for, as he remarked, he felt as though he had robbed me by taking my little painting, and wished to make it up to me in some way. 'When can you begin?' 'Now,' said I; 'at once.' 'Good!' he exclaimed; 'what fun!' . . . When I said at last: 'There, it is finished,' he exclaimed: 'I like it. That is the man I shave every morning.'"

This portrait, which is owned by the Museum, and is included in the present exhibition (No. 1), may be said to have determined Mr. Vinton's career. It was exhibited at the private gallery of Messrs. Doll and Richards, and excited much interest and attention. Its sure and vigorous handling struck a new note, and while it was somewhat suggestive of the painter's French masters, it was so individual and sincere as to show conclusively that a new and noteworthy personality had entered the field. Mr. Vinton had painted it with a direct simplicity, much as he might



I THOMAS GOLD APPLETON

have painted a French peasant. Dr. Rimmer, who came into town to see it, congratulated him upon the success of the portrait, and then added with a smile: "It is perhaps too strong." It certainly did not indicate an artist who would make his way by painting pretty flatteries; but as time goes on the work gains steadily in favor.

Mr. Vinton now settled down to steady work, and commissions followed one upon another. That winter he painted Sir Lyon Playfair, Mr. Samuel H. Russell, Dr. Alexander Vinton, and others; and after these came in the next ten years portraits of Causten Browne, William Endicott, William H. Gardiner, Wendell Phillips, Charles Francis Adams, William Warren, Francis Parkman, Dr. Peabody, General Charles Devens, Dr. Stephen Wheatland, Senator George F. Hoar, Dr. Henry J. Bigelow, and more than sixty others. Mr. Vinton took a leading and undisputed place in the front ranks of American portrait painters, and this he held without challenge to the day of his death.

In 1880 Mr. Vinton was made a member of the Society of American Artists, New York. In 1881 he removed to the studio most strongly associated with his name, that which had been occupied by William M. Hunt in the building (not now standing) at the corner of Park Square and Boylston Street. It is hardly too much to say that the studio became the artistic centre of Boston. Mr. Vinton was a man whose personality would make itself felt any-

where; he was concerned in all the important art events of the town, and for that matter was in request all over the country as a member of art-juries and hanging-committees; the critics of the Boston papers were constantly consulting him; and his opinion was held in general esteem. As he had in 1875 stirred up a commotion by his frankness, he not infrequently aroused antagonism by his plain speech; but his hatred for shams and for what he felt to be bad in art was too strong to pass off in silence because of any fear of consequences.

In 1882 Mr. Vinton went for the second time to Europe, and while there passed three months in Spain, engaged largely in the study of Velasquez. His copies of the Spanish master are in themselves noteworthy, and aroused much interest when, after his return to America, they were shown in Boston and other cities. They prove at a glance how thoroughly he entered into the spirit of these magnificent works. He was this year elected Associate of the National Academy of Design.

In June, 1888, Mr. Vinton married Miss Annie M. Pierce, of Newport, Rhode Island, and with his bride discussed seriously the project of removing to New York. A number of his associates had already done so, or had decided upon the change. Dewing, Walker, Porter, Appleton Brown, and others saw in New York a wider and richer field; and certain influential New York dealers were

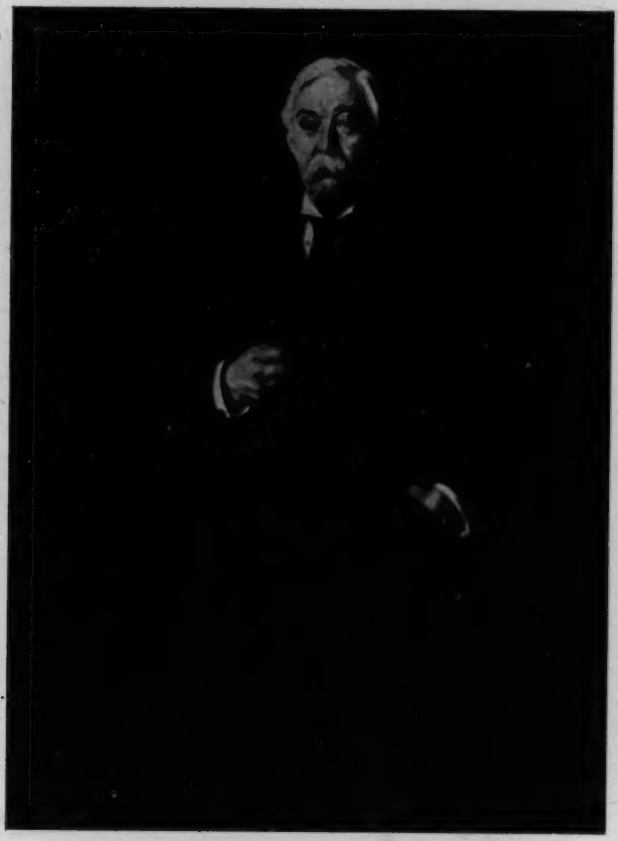
ready to assure Mr. Vinton of vogue and prosperity if he would follow his fellow-painters. Fortunately for our city, however it may have been for him, he decided to remain in Boston, and for some years he continued to paint in the Park Square studio. After a few years in Exeter Street, he bought, in 1892, the house on Newbury Street in which he resided for the rest of his life. At the top of this house he built a wonderful pair of studios, altering and rebuilding over and over until he had things quite to his mind. His masterpieces are divided fairly evenly between this *atelier* and the wide old room in Park Square.

In June, 1889, Mr. and Mrs. Vinton went abroad, and remained for eighteen months. They visited France, Italy, and Holland, with a week in England. The artist's enthusiasm over the work of Franz Hals was hardly second to his admiration for Velasquez, and subtly influenced his later work. During his stay in Paris Mr. Vinton painted the well-known portrait of his wife, which, exhibited in the Salon of 1890, received *Mention Honorable*. This picture, with others, also won a gold medal at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago, in 1893.

After his return to Boston in the autumn of 1890, Mr. Vinton took up his work with fresh vigor. He had abundant commissions, and that general and undisputed recognition which stimulates an artist to his best. In 1891 he was made a full Academician of the National Academy

of Design. In 1894 he painted the admirable portrait of the Hon. Alanson W. Beard (No. 29), which by its wonderful vitality deservedly won a silver medal at the Paris Salon of 1900. To this period belong also portraits of Dr. Samuel A. Green, Bishop Lawrence, Archbishop Williams, the Hon. George S. Boutwell, Dr. John Collins Warren, John C. Gray, the Rev. George A. Gordon, Dr. Carroll D. Wright, Dr. G. Stanley Hall, and many others. In 1909 his work was awarded the Temple gold medal by the Pennsylvania Academy. The finished portraits of Mr. Vinton number between two and three hundred, and embrace a surprising variety not only in subject, but no less in treatment. The fervor with which he worked, and his nervously sensitive temperament, combined with so much labor, wore him out; and although he showed no failure in his artistic powers, his friends were deeply troubled by his physical condition long before the end came on the morning of May 20, 1911.

It is not fitting for the present writer to attempt a technical criticism of Mr. Vinton's qualities as an artist, even were a sketch of this sort the place appropriate for such a judgment; but certain points were apparent to artists and laymen alike. No one could see his portraits or know the man without being struck by the seriousness and integrity with which he did his work. No artist ever more truly painted with his conscience, and his reverence



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for the dignity and nobility of art was a rebuke to every man of vulgar or mercenary soul who came in contact with his straightforward nature. He was a realist in the sense that he rendered what he saw with the most simple and direct frankness; but from the faults which may result from a realism too exact, his art was saved by the manner in which what he saw was qualified by his thoroughly artistic temperament. How close to the fact he came is illustrated by the remark of a physician from Philadelphia, who, seeing in an exhibition at the St. Botolph Club, a portrait by Mr. Vinton of a subject who had lost the use of his ears, remarked to a friend: "He 's painted a deaf man." He was asked why he supposed the original to be defective in his hearing. "Why," the other answered, "can't you see that he 's listening with his eyes?" When Mr. Vinton was asked if he had intentionally given this expression to his sitter, he answered simply: "I only painted what I saw."

It was a great disappointment to Mr. Vinton that he was not allowed to paint William Warren in the character of Sir Peter Teazle, and had he done so we should have a great character portrait. Mrs. Vincent and Miss Annie Clarke said of the existing picture (No. 10): "This is the man we know and love behind the scenes, but it will not be recognized by the public as the comedian."

Although Mr. Vinton was known by his portraits, he

has done enough in other lines, as is shown by the present collection, to prove that had he devoted himself to landscape, he would have won a place no less notable. During his early stay in Paris he was naturally under the influence of the Barbizon School, in favor of which he had been strongly predisposed before he left Boston. His landscapes of the time show this affiliation with complete frankness. When, however, during his stay in Europe in 1889–90, he came in contact with Impressionism, then rising into full recognition, his whole method of painting nature altered. He embraced the new gospel of sunlight and open air with the artistic enthusiasm which was characteristic of him; and the brilliant landscape bought by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the last week of the painter's life (No. 76) indicates how intelligently and effectively he was able to apply it without effacing his own individuality.

It is to be regretted that a number of Mr. Vinton's strong portraits are lacking in the present exhibition because the owners — for the most part corporations — have declined to lend them. Despite this fact, the collection is an excellent representation of his work; and in its breadth, its sincerity, its directness, and its strength it may be said to present a faithful characterization not only of the artist, but of the man. It is with regret that I have felt bound to confine this sketch to the artistic career of Mr. Vinton,

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and undoubtedly many will feel the lack of an appreciation of his social and more personal side. His quick wit, absolute sincerity, complete self-honesty, and other traits which his friends know well must, however, be left for some recorder who aims to give a more complete picture, and who is not hampered by the limitations necessarily imposed upon one whose only business for the moment is to say a word at the entrance of an exhibition which vigorously, persuasively, and to us who knew him, touchingly speaks for itself.

ARLO BATES

PORTRAITS

1. THOMAS GOLD APPLETON
   Museum of Fine Arts (Estate of Nathan Appleton)

2. CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS
   Mrs. H. P. Quincy

3. J. INGERSOLL BOWDITCH
   Mrs. H. P. Bowditch

4. CAUSTEN BROWNE
   Social Law Library

5. DR. GEORGE E. ELLIS
   Massachusetts Historical Society

6. MRS. THEOPHILUS CHANDLER
   Theophilus Chandler

7. WENDELL PHILLIPS
Dr. John C. Phillips

8. WILLIAM H. GARDINER
Mrs. William Robinson Cabot

9. JUDGE OTIS P. LORD
Essex Bar Association

10. WILLIAM WARREN
Museum of Fine Arts

11. AUGUSTUS FLAGG
Mrs. A. Flagg

12. DR. A. P. PEABODY
Miss Peabody

13. HON. GEORGE FRISBIE HOAR
Worcester Law Library

14. THEODORE CHASE
Mrs. T. Chase

17 DR. HENRY WHEATLAND

15. ELISHA ATKINS
Bostonian Society

16. WILLIAM SIMES
William Simes

17. DR. HENRY WHEATLAND
Essex Institute

18. DR. HUMPHREY STORER
Boston Medical Library

19. MRS. E. W. KINSLEY
Mrs. Frederic H. Prince

20. MRS. FREDERIC P. VINTON
Mrs. F. P. Vinton

21. DR. HENRY J. BIGELOW
Boston Medical Library

22. MRS. WALDO LINCOLN
Waldo Lincoln

23. CHARLES B. AMORY
Charles B. Amory

24. SAMUEL WELLS
Mrs. Samuel Wells

25. PROFESSOR C. C. LANGDELL
Harvard University

26. GEORGE F. BLAKE
Mrs. James M. Newell

27. FRANCIS BARTLETT
Herbert M. Sears

28. DR. SAMUEL A. GREEN
Groton Public Library

29. ALANSON W. BEARD
United States Custom House, Boston

30. JOHN CODMAN ROPES
Massachusetts Military Historical Society

19 MRS. E. W. KINSLEY

LIBRARY

31. ARCHBISHOP JOHN J. WILLIAMS
Archbishop O'Connell

32. EX-GOVERNOR GEORGE S. BOUTWELL
Groton Public Library

33. COMMODORE GEORGE H. PERKINS
Mrs. Larz Anderson

34. JOHN HARSEN RHOADES
Greenwich Savings Bank, New York

35. DR. J. COLLINS WARREN
Dr. J. C. Warren

36. ANDREW G. WEEKS
Mrs. S. Reed Anthony

37. DR. JAMES C. WHITE
Harvard Medical School

38. DR. WILLIAM J. TUCKER
Dartmouth College

39. DR. J. COLLINS WARREN
Massachusetts General Hospital

40. MOORFIELD STOREY
Moorfield Storey

41. JOHN C. GRAY
Harvard Law School

42. CHARLES G. WASHBURN
Hon. C. G. Washburn

43. CARROLL D. WRIGHT
Clark College

44. DR. G. STANLEY HALL
Clark University

45. EDWIN GINN
Edwin Ginn

46. MRS. E. G. PEIRCE
Mrs. W. A. Wheeler

31 ARCHBISHOP JOHN J. WILLIAMS

47. DR. S. J. MIXTER
Mrs. S. J. Mixter

48. WILLIAM H. VINTON
Mrs. F. P. Vinton

49. MR. JAMES H. CLEMENT
Mrs. C. E. C. Waters

LANDSCAPES AND GENRE SUBJECTS

50. UNE BOHÉMIENNE
City of Lowell

51. A CHOIR BOY
Bradford Merrill

52. SPANISH GIRL
Mrs. L. P. Bartlett

53. SUNSET IN BAIE ST. PAUL
C. C. Peirce

54. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. G. H. Stoddard

55. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. W. F. Whitney

56. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. W. F. Whitney

57. MARINE
Mrs. G. W. Chadwick

58. LANDSCAPE
Keith McLeod

59. LANDSCAPE
H. M. Rogers

60. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. S. J. Mixter

61. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. Norman McLeod

62. MARINE
Mrs. Robert Payson

63. LANDSCAPE: SOLITUDE
Mrs. D. W. Snow

64. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. W. A. Wheeler

65. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. W. A. Wheeler

66. MARINE
Mrs. George Peirce

67. MARINE
Mrs. D. M. Clapp

68. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. K. G. Wells

69. LANDSCAPE
Mrs. K. G. Wells